

Dissertation Advice*

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1. You're probably wondering how in the world you can write 250 pages! But this is both *easy* and *irrelevant*.
 - (a) *Its easy* because a dissertation is the equivalent of maybe 3-5 papers, and you've written that many every year for at least the last 10. So write a paper, then another, and then another; at worst you wind up with a series of articles as a dissertation; at best you have a whole research program or a book.
 - (b) *Its irrelevant* because the dissertation is not about writing 250 pages; its about reorienting your life, making the transition from a student taking classes — doing what you're told — to an independent, active professional, regularly making contributions to the literature. To do this, you need to arrange your whole life, or at least the large professional portion of it, around this goal. This transition can be brutal, but it is crucial for far more than your dissertation. You must change not into a dissertation writer, but into a professional academic.
 - (c) Psychologists say that to become an expert it takes 10 years of “effortful learning” (which is a lot more than just practice; its hard, and means pushing beyond the edge of your competence); you can't do that without changing your life and figuring out how you can devote enough hours to get this done.
2. Never shoot for the immediate goal; aim for the one after that.
 - (a) One reason is that the prospectus is impossible: you need to convince 3+ faculty that you will discover something that will surprise them and that they do not now believe to be true.
 - (b) The prospectus is irrelevant: no one in the world will care about this 5 minutes after its approved. No one will ever ask you whether you did what was in your prospectus, etc.

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- (c) Don't write a prospectus, write a chapter, since you want to make sure you get some useful advice from the prospectus conference.
 - (d) Dissertations are useless 5 minutes after the defense and so don't write a dissertation, write a book or a series of articles; they will qualify fine as a dissertation. (& don't ever use the word "dissertation" in the text)
 - (e) Do not go to dissertation defenses (except your own!!); they are a waste of time. Go to all the job talks you can and imagine you'll be in their place soon.
3. Your goal is to answer the key question; *whose mind are you going to change about what?*
- (a) Identify your audience: exactly whose mind is it that you will change? If no one reads what you write, it won't matter how good it is.
 - (b) Don't choose a "dissertation topic". You've already done that by your choice of subfield, etc. Your goal is to produce some clear *results* or *arguments*.
 - (c) Rigorously organize your work to answer the key question. Ruthlessly remove *any* point, section, or paragraph that does not directly answer this question or address your argument. (You don't have to delete these, which can cause separation anxiety! Just put them in a folder for other projects.)
 - (d) The point of your dissertation is not (or not only!) to show people how smart you are; its to prove your point, make your argument, or solve a problem. Everything else gets removed.
 - (e) A measure of whether you've succeeded: your argument (and its structure) ought to be crystal clear from your table of contents without reading the text. Print it out and keep coming back to it.
 - (f) Do not write a literature review. Those people have their own books and dissertations where they make their points; they don't get to be in your work unless they help you make your point.
 - (g) Be professional: Leave out gratuitous or fawning citations to your professors; you can tell them how great they are in person if you like.
 - (h) The dissertation needn't be "symmetric" with respect to the evidence: present all available observable implications of your theory, even if one is an ethnography of a restaurant and another is a cross-national quantitative study. Any good evidence or argument can help you answer the key question about whose mind you're going to change about what.
4. A few practical points
- (a) Imagine 2 identical dissertations, but the first few pages of one is rewritten so that it *resonates with your audience*. The author of that one will get a great job and have great future. The other no so much. You must learn this.

- (b) Start researching and writing: *She who shows up with a pile of paper gets the degree.* Although when you are ready, you may need to educate your advisor that its time for you to graduate.
 - (c) It might take more time than you think; might require recasting your argument, recollecting your evidence, or reanalyzing your data. Don't get discouraged; they call it *research*, not *search*, for a reason! But get it done. In my experience, almost all dissertations are written in 4 months, although it takes some years to start, and sometimes requires some motivation, like a job offer. So get started.
 - (d) See your advisor regularly, but go with results, not to schmooze and not to demonstrate that you haven't done any work.
5. This process may sometimes seem like drudgery, and it is true that aside from all this you are also allowed to have a life! But do not forget that you are tremendously privileged to participate in science and academia and discovery and learning — by far the most exciting thing to 99% of the faculty here. The thrill of discovery, the adrenalin-producing ah-ha moments, etc., are more exciting than all the skiing and mountain biking you could possibly do in a lifetime. Don't miss how intoxicating and thrilling it all really is.